The Confucian Concept of Jen and the Feminist Ethics of Care: A Comparative Study

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This article compares Confucian ethics of Jen and feminist ethics of care. It attempts to show that they share philosophically significant common grounds. Its findings affirm the view that care-orientation in ethics is not a characteristic peculiar to one sex. It also shows that care-orientation is not peculiar to subordinated social groups. Arguing that the oppression of women is not an essential element of Confucian ethics, the author indicates the Confucianism and feminism are compatible.

The purpose of this paper is to compare two philosophies that have seldom been brought together, Confucianism and feminism. Specifically, I will compare the concept of Jen, the central concept of Confucian ethics, and the concept of care, the central concept of feminist care ethics.[1] Originated from a feudal society, Confucianism has been typically patriarchal. It has a long history, and in some areas of the world it is so deeply involved in people's lives that it may properly be called a religion. Like most religions, this religion gives little recognition to women. The feminist care ethics is relatively new. As a philosophy, it is growing quickly and has become a force not to be ignored. One striking feature of this ethics is that it is antipatriarchal. This means that it is against not only male dominance in the society but also against the "male/masculine" way of thinking in general. So one might suppose that Confucian ethics and feminist ethics are diametrically opposed to each other. This essay does not aim to show the differences between the two, which should be rather apparent, but the similarities, to which people normally do not pay attention. Do Confucian ethics and feminist care ethics have anything in common? If so, what are these common aspects? How important are they? While refraining from directly evaluating the validity of the two ethics, which

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goes beyond the domain of the present paper, I will show that they share common grounds far more important than has been realized and these important common grounds would make it possible for them to learn from and support each other.

I. JEN AND CARE: AS THE HIGHEST MORAL IDEALS

Morality concerns the code of acceptable behavior in a society. Our understanding of the nature of morality has much to do with our understanding of the nature of the society. In investigating Confucian ethics and feminist care ethics, we should first note that both the Confucian society and the society advocated by the care perspective philosophers are noncontractual societies.

A major traditional Western social theory views individual persons as rational beings with self-interests and certain rights. They enter the society as if they had signed a social contract with each other for the purpose of mutual gains, and by this contract their individual rights are guaranteed. Thus the relation between members of a society is like a contractual relation. In contrast, the Confucian views the society as a large family in which the ruler's relation to the subjects is like that of a father to his children. For Confucius, just as there is no contract within the family, there is no contract in the society either. The philosophy of managing a good family and that of managing a good society are essentially the same. The Western division of "public sphere" and "private sphere" simply does not exist in Confucianism. Some feminists have a similar analogy between a family and a society. Virginia Held, for instance, attacks the assumption that human beings are independent, self-interested or mutually disinterested individuals. She believes that "relations between mothers and children should be thought of as primary, and the sort of human relation all other human relations should resemble or reflect" (Held 1987a, 114-15).[2] The relation between mothers and children is to a large extent nonvoluntary and hence noncontractual.

This way of understanding the nature of human societies is crucial for the unfolding of Confucian ethics as well as the feminist care ethics discussed here. For if the society is a contractual society, justice is served only if each participant's rights are guaranteed; and as long as these rights are not violated, morality is satisfied. Neither Confucian nor feminist care ethics bases its morality on individual rights. As Carol Gilligan observes, a woman's "construction of moral understanding is not based on the primacy and universality of individual rights, but rather on a 'very strong sense of being responsible to the world' " (Gilligan 1982, 21). Within this construction, the moral dilemma is not "how to exercise one's rights without interfering with the rights of others," but how "to lead a moral life which includes obligations to myself and my family and people in general" (Gilligan 1982, 21). For Confucius, the concept of individual rights has no place in morality. Morality is a matter of

fulfilling one's proper role in the society, as a son, a brother, a father, and, further, as a ruler or a subject under the ruler. In this noncontractual society, for the Confucian, the key concept to guide human relations is Jen, and for the feminist of this perspective, care.

Confucianism is also called "the philosophy of Jen" ("*Jen Xue*"). The concept of Jen occupies a central place in the Confucian philosophy (see Chan 1975). In the *Analects* Confucius (551—479 B.C.) mentioned "Jen" as many as 105 times, but he never formally defined it. In the English world, scholars have translated "Jen" by many terms—benevolence, love, altruism, kindness, charity, compassion, magnanimity, human-heartedness, humaneness, humanity, perfect virtue, goodness, true manhood, manhood at its best, and so on (see Chan 1955). These translations reflect the two senses in which Confucius used the word "Jen," "Jen of affection," and "Jen of virtue" (see Teruo 1965). In the sense of "Jen of affection," Jen stands for the tender aspect of human feelings and an altruistic concern for others (see Tu 1981). Confucius said, "Jen is to love others" (*Analects*, 12: 22).[3] One can readily experience the sense of Jen if willing to do so. Confucius said, "Is Jen indeed so far away? If we really want Jen, we should find that it is at our very side" (7: 29). In Mencius (372-289 B.C.), the Chinese philosopher second only to Confucius in Confucianism, Jen is treated almost exclusively in the sense of affection. Mencius made Jen as affection the foundation of his ethics. He said, "No man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the suffering of others. . . . The heart of compassion is the germ of Jen" (2A: 6), and "for every man there are things he cannot bear. To extend this to what he can bear is Jen" (7B: 31). Sympathy naturally arises in one's heart when one sees other people suffer. One would not want to bear seeing sufferings. To extend this feeling to other things in the world and thus make it a general disposition is called Jen. In this sense, Jen is benevolence, love, altruism, tenderness, charity, compassion, human-heartedness, humaneness, and so on.

In the other sense, the sense of "Jen of virtue," Jen is a general virtue which has to be realized among other virtues. For example, Confucius said, "You are Jen if everywhere under Heaven you can practice the five: courtesy, breadth, good faith, diligence and clemency" (17: 6). In this sense, a person of Jen is a morally perfect person, and Jen may be translated as "perfect virtue," "goodness," "true manhood," and "manhood at its best."

Although the relation between "Jen of affection" and "Jen of virtue" is subject to different interpretations, one thing is certain: a person cannot have the latter without the former. A person who has Jen as a general virtue cannot lack Jen as affection. In order to understand Confucian ethics we must first of all understand the concept of Jen as affection.

The word "Jen" in Chinese consists of a simple ideogram of a human figure and two horizontal strokes suggesting human relations. What is this relation? What is the core of the concept of Jen as affection? If benevolence, love,

altruism, kindness, charity, compassion, human-heartedness, and humaneness all translate the concept of Jen, what do all these terms have in common? The word emerging in my mind is "caring." Taken as a virtue of human relations, "caring" is the essence of every one of these terms. If a person does not care for others, he or she cannot be described in any of these term. For example, benevolence is the kindly disposition to do good and promote the welfare of others. If one does not care for others, he or she cannot be benevolent. Confucius came closest to a definition of Jen when he said "Jen is to *ai* others" (17: 22). Although "love" is the common translation of "*ai*," the English word expresses an emotion stronger than "*ai*." *Shou Wen*, a major dictionary of ancient Chinese, interprets "*ai*" as "*hui*," i.e., clemency. In Chinese, "*ai*" is often used in phrases such as "*ai-hu*" ("take good care of") or "*ai-xi*" ("cherish"). In the phrases "*ai-mo-neng-zhu*" and "*ai-wu-ji-wu*," "*ai*" is best understood as "caring for tenderly." They respectively mean "I care about it but cannot help" and "caring for the house along with the bird on its roof." "Caring" is more appropriate in expressing this tender feeling one has toward people and things.

In Mencius, Jen as "caring" is more evident. If a child were to fall into a well, why should one care? Mencius believed that a person cares because he or she has compassion. A person has a natural tendency or disposition to be Jen, to care, and therefore to act to save the child. One does not have to love the child to save her. In situations like this, a person who holds a "who-cares?" attitude is one without a human heart. Although the heart of Jen is natural, Mencius also said that a moral person needs to develop one's heart of Jen, along with the heart of shame, of courtesy and modesty, and of right and wrong. "If a man is able to develop all these germs that he possesses, it will be like a fire starting up or a spring coming through" (2A: 6). Moral cultivation and development will make the natural instinctual heart of Jen a mature moral virtue. Like Confucius, Mencius's ideal form of government is one of Jen. He saw that princes of some states took the people away from their work during the busy farming seasons, making it impossible for them to till the land and minister to the needs of their parents. Thus parents suffered cold and hunger while brothers, wives, and children were separated and scattered. These princes did not care for their people. Mencius believed that in order to become a true king, one must care and practice the government of Jen toward the people (1A: 5). In other words, being caring, or Jen, is the way to become a good ruler. Both Confucius and Mencius believed that if a government is really one of Jen, one which takes good care of its people, there would be no crime or poverty. If the ruler cares for his people, he will make sure that people do not miss their farming seasons, and thus they will have good harvests in good years and be prepared for bad years. When people have enough food, they behave themselves well and do not steal or rob. It is not that we do not have enough punishment; nor is it that we do not have enough taxation. It is that

we do not have enough care, and this sometimes makes life unbearable. What we really need is care.

Whether Confucius and Mencius are right in what they said is open to discussion. What we can conclude from their teachings is that, in Confucian philosophy, to be a person of Jen one must care for others. So, even if the entire concept of Jen cannot be reduced to "caring," at least we can say that "caring" occupies a central place in this concept. As Lik Kuen Tong has properly concluded, Confucianism is a care-oriented humanism and the Confucian love ("*ai*") is a caring, responsible love (Tong 1973). To understand the care orientation of Confucian ethics is the key for us to understand the concept of Jen as Confucius's highest moral ideal.

At this point it may be useful to compare Confucius's conception of virtue with Plato's, which has been very influential in the West. In Confucius, the three cardinal virtues are wisdom, courage, and Jen.[4] Plato's four cardinal virtues are wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. Confucius believed that in order to become a person of Jen, one needs to "conquer oneself and return to propriety" (20: 1). Within this context, "to conquer oneself" means self-cultivation (Tu 1968).[5] It includes controlling one's desires in accordance with "*li*", i.e., the Confucian proper social behavior. Hence it can be said that the concept of Jen implies temperance. Now we can see that where Plato placed justice Confucius placed Jen. In Plato justice is the highest moral ideal, which is achieved only when the other three virtues are duly practiced. But this ideal is missing in Confucius. Confucius, for whom Jen is almost synonymous with morality, would find it unintelligible for a morality not to include the concept of Jen. This difference between the two major philosophers is not an accident. It reflects a major divergence between the two ethics. At this point Confucius would certainly find more common ground with feminist care ethics than Plato's justice ethics.

In the feminist care perspective, the highest ideal of morality is caring. In her study of women's ethics in *In a Different Voice*, Carol Gilligan found that "morality, for these women, centers on care" (1982, 125). A moral person is one who cares for others, or as Nel Noddings put it, "one-caring." Noddings writes, "It is this ethical ideal (caring), this realistic picture of ourselves as one-caring, that guides us as we strive to meet the other morally" (1984, 5). While Confucius believed that a person of Jen is one who "wishing to sustain himself, sustains others; wishing to develop himself, cares for the development of others" (6: 28), a female interviewee in Carol Gilligan's study equates morality with caring for others and considers responsibility to mean "that you care about that other person, that you are sensitive to that other person's needs and you consider them as a part of your needs" (Gilligan, 1982, 139). Another interviewee believed that "if everyone on earth behaved in a way that showed care for others and courage, the world would be a much better place, you wouldn't have crime and you might not have poverty" (Gilligan 1982, 165).

She would agree with Confucius and Mencius that a good government as well as a good person is one that cares, and promotes care, for the people. Gilligan writes, "The ideal of care is . . . an activity of relationship, of seeing and responding to need, taking care of the world by sustaining the web of connection so that no one is left alone" (1982, 62).

As the highest moral ideal, care serves as the guidance of one's moral behavior. In our world, things are often complicated. People may get into moral dilemmas that have no easy solutions. In such cases, all we can ask people to do is to care for those who will be affected by their decisions. A really caring person is not one who merely sits there and says to oneself, "I care." One must make an effort to look into the situation and the effects of possible decisions. Afterwards, we may praise one for having been caring or accuse one for having not been caring enough (therefore people may have been hurt). But it is unreasonable to demand more than that. Things are not perfect. We cannot demand anyone to make things perfect. As long as one cares reasonably enough, morality is satisfied.

Then why should I care? For the care ethics, I am obliged to care because I place the utmost value on the relatedness of caring. As Noddings put it, "This value itself arises as a product of actual caring and being cared-for and my reflection on the goodness of these concrete caring situations" (1984, 84). In Confucian philosophy, we find a similar line of argument. Confucius never addressed the issue what the purpose of Jen is. Jen is the destiny of humankind and is good in itself. Asking "why should I be Jen?" would be like asking "why should I be good?" which has no proper answer except that we value it. Confucius seemed to have taken it for granted that humans want to be good and to avoid evil. He said, "If you aim at Jen then you can avoid evil" (4: 4). When his disciple asked him whether a person of Jen would ever complain about what might seem an undesirable situation because of being Jen, Confucius said, "If you seek Jen and get it, why should you complain?" (7: 14; my translation). Similarly as Confucius values Jen as a virtue with value in itself, Noddings believes that "caring is important in itself" (Noddings 1984, 7). Only with care can a person be a moral person. Only in the practice of caring, can a person become a moral person. It is caring, not the consequences of it, which establishes moral values. At this point both Confucianism and the feminist care ethics differ widely from utilitarianism and consequentialism. Jen and care are not to be justified in terms of the consequences they bring about, though the consequences are generally desirable. As the highest moral ideals, Jen and care are good in themselves.

II. JEN AND CARE: ETHICS WITHOUT GENERAL PRINCIPLES

In the *Analects*, Confucius talked many times about how to become a person of Jen. But each time he came up with something different. He never gave a

general guideline. This is by no means negligence. Jen cannot be achieved by following general principles.

In the last two thousand years a vast number of rules have been developed in the Confucian tradition. For instance, there were the rules that girls and boys older than seven should not sit at the same dining table, and a man would have to accept the bride picked by his parents, whether he liked her or not. But we must note the differences between Confucian rules and rules in other ethics, e.g., Kantian or utilitarian ethics. First, these rules are not an essential feature of Confucian morality. At the same time, different places often have different rules, even though they all are Confucian. And over the years these rules have changed, many have even disappeared. Yet Confucian ethics remains. Second, these rules are specific rules, not general principles. They are not like the utilitarian principle that one should always maximize total net utility or the Kantian principle that one should always treat people as ends. In Confucianism, these specific rules are guidelines for young people to learn *li*, i.e., proper social behavior. Rules of *li* are important, but learning Jen is more important. Confucius indicated that, without Jen, *li* is of no use (3: 3). For him, being ethical is being Jen; it is not merely a matter of following specific rules.

Where Confucius talked about reciprocity, he talked about things mostly like general rules. Confucius told his disciple Shen that his philosophy had one thread that ran through it. When others asked Shen about it, Shen said "loyalty and reciprocity" (4: 15). Loyalty here means loyalty to one's cause. If one is loyal to one's cause, one should exert all one's strength to the cause. Reciprocity means being considerate of others. But Confucius's notion of reciprocity goes beyond that of the rights and justice perspective. Proponents of the rights/justice perspective also believe in reciprocity. Their notion of reciprocity is the basis for the social contract: if you do not infringe upon my rights, I will not infringe upon yours. Confucius believed in the Golden Rule, "Never do unto others what you do not want others to do to you" (12: 2). He also believed that a person of Jen should sustain others if he wishes to sustain himself, and care for the development of others if he wishes to develop himself (6: 28). That is, instead of leaving people alone, he should understand others' situations and care for them. Clearly, Confucius extended the notion of reciprocity beyond the limit of the "rights perspective" to the "care perspective." For Noddings, caring has the distinctive feature of motivational displacement. She writes, in caring, "when we see the other's reality as a possibility for me, we must act to eliminate the intolerable, to reduce the pain, to fill the need to actualize the dream," and in caring, there is "a total conveyance of the self to the other" (1984, 14, 61). When one wants to do something, one should ask, "How would my action affect others?" "Would I want a person to do this if I were in their situation?" This way of thinking requires more than non-interference. This kind of reciprocity is different from rules in Kantian or utilitarian ethics. It demands that one should care for others.

To say "always care for others" is very different from saying "always follow such-and-such a general rule." Traditional Western ethical theories have principles or general rules for people to follow. Utilitarianism, for example, follows the rule to maximize total net or average utility. In addition to general rules there is also the thesis of universalizability. This is the idea that if one person is obliged to do x under certain conditions, then everyone under sufficiently similar conditions is obliged to do x, no exceptions. While the care perspective does not entirely deny that we can receive some guidance from principles, there seem to be no general rules to determine whether a situation is sufficiently similar to another. More often than not general principles do not solve problems for us. We need to inquire into individual cases. Noddings said that her feminist care ethics "does not attempt to reduce the need for human judgment with a series of 'Thou Shalts' and 'Thou Shalt nots.' Rather, it recognizes and calls forth human judgment across a wide range of fact and feeling, and it allows for situations and conditions in which judgment may properly be put aside in favor of faith and commitments" (1984, 25). For example, there can be no general principles that will give a mother a definitive answer to whether she should send the money to charity or spend it on her child's favorite meal. It really depends on individual situations, and individual situations vary from time to time and from place to place.

What makes Confucian ethics more like feminist care ethics than justice ethics is not that they have or do not have rules but that they both remain flexible with rules. When a rule fails to work, instead of trying to make up another rule, as justice ethics would do, they will readily accept flexibility with rules. Noddings writes: "The one-caring is wary of rules and principles. She formulates and holds loosely, tentatively, as economies of a sort, but she insists upon holding closely to the concrete" (1984, 55). In caring, a person may get into conflicts. Noddings gives us an example in which a professor receives a research proposal from graduate student B. In the proposal B proposes to do research that requires deceiving the subjects involved in the research (Noddings 1984, 54). On the one hand, the professor does not want to hurt B by turning the proposal down. On the other hand, the professor is not sure whether the subjects would be hurt by the experiment. If they would not be hurt and B succeeds in the research, then everything would be fine. But what if they are hurt? In cases like this, there would be no general infallible rules or principles to follow. It is not to say there cannot be any rules. There are rules. But rules cannot give us infallible solutions in conflicting situations of caring.

Moreover, even though we can follow rules, rules do not have the overriding power in deciding our actions. Noddings thinks that although general principles call for support to the socially oppressed people, a caring person would fight along with her father and brother against the oppressed if they are on the opposite side of the oppressed (1984, 109).[6] While this may sound extreme, it does make the point clear: general rules are not absolute. This is so because,

as Joan C. Tronto put it, "The perspective of care requires that conflict be worked out without damage to the continuing relationships. Moral problems can be expressed in terms of accommodating the needs of the self and of others, of balancing competition and cooperation, and of maintaining the social web of relations in which one finds oneself" (1987, 658). Under certain circumstances, a caring person needs to break the rules to preserve social relations.

Confucius again would share the view of these feminists. He believed that, even though we normally consider theft to be wrong, a son should not expose it if his own father stole a sheep from his neighbor (13: 18). He said, "In serving his father and mother a man may gently remonstrate with them. But if he sees that he has failed to change their opinion, he should resume an attitude of deference and not thwart them" (4: 18). At first glance, this may sound immoral. But if Jen and care are the highest moral ideals, it is only reasonable to follow Noddings's and Confucius's way, especially given the gradation of caring (which will be discussed later).

Often Confucianism leaves the impression that filial piety to one's parents is absolute. This is not so. In Confucianism, a person has many duties. Besides filial piety to parents, one also has the duty of loyalty (*zhong*) to the ruler. The two duties may come into conflict. For instance, when the country is being invaded, a man has the duty to answer the ruler's call to fight at the frontline. But what if his aging parents also need his daily assistance? Under situations like this one, Confucianism offers no general rules to solve the problem. It depends on individual circumstances, and, as long as one cares, he can be Jen even though failing to perform his duty.

Focusing on Jen of affection, Mencius seemed even more flexible on general principles. He said, "All that is to be expected of a gentleman is Jen. Why must he act exactly the same as other gentlemen?" (6B: 6). For Mencius, "A gentleman need not keep his word nor does he necessarily see his action through to the end. He aims only at what is right (appropriate)" (B: 11).[7] This remark seems to suggest that a person of Jen may not always live up to one's words as long as what one does is right or proper. Here the doctrine of living up to one's words, which would appear as a general principle, does not always determine what is appropriate. Unlike Kant, who believed that a person should never tell a lie, Mencius suggested that sometimes telling a lie is acceptable. He told a story about Tseng Tzu. Mencius told that after his meal Tseng Tzu's father Tseng Hsi would ask Tseng Tzu whether there was any food left for the family, and Tseng Tzu always replied in the affirmative even when actually no food was left. In this way, Tseng Tzu was able to give his father more gratification (4A: 19). Though being honest is a virtue, whether we should tell the truth or a lie depends on individual circumstances. There are no general principles to follow. A person of Jen is one with good judgment who knows what to do and when.

Noddings notes that even though not following general rules, a caring person is not capricious. Like Mencius, Noddings believes that moral life based on caring is coherent and one can be content if there has been no violation of caring (1984, 56-57). No ethics can be entirely devoid of rules, general rules or rules of thumb. One difference between Confucian ethics and feminist care ethics on the one hand, and Kantian ethics and utilitarian ethics on the other, is that the former are not as rule- or principle-oriented.[8] A person of Jen or a caring person knows where and when not to depend on rules.

III. JEN AND CARING WITH GRADATIONS

As a person of Jen, a person of caring, should I care for everyone equally? On this question feminist philosophers are divided. But with some feminist care philosophers the Confucian shares an important common ground.

Confucius distinguished between a person of Jen and a sage. Once his disciple Tzu-kung asked him, "If a person confers benefits on the people universally and is able to assist all, what would you say of him? Would you call him a person of Jen?" Confucius said, "Why only a person of Jen? He is without doubt a sage. Even (sage-emperors) Yao and Shun fell short of it" (6: 28; my translation). Only sages are able to practice universal love. It is noble and admirable but far beyond ordinary people's moral horizon. For ordinary people, the highest moral ideal is Jen, not being a sage.[9]

On the issue whether a person should care for everyone equally, Confucius and Mo Tzu (479-438 B.C.), the founder of Mohism, are diametrically opposed. Mo Tzu, the major rival of Confucians of the time, also believed in *ai* or love. But he believed in universal love (*jian-ai*) and urged everyone to "regard other people's countries as one's own. Regard other people's families as one's own. Regard other people's person as one's own."[10] Mencius condemned Mo Tzu's universalism as an ethics with "no father" (3B: 9). The difference here, however, is not whether one should love or care for other people universally. Mencius himself said, "A person of Jen embraces all in his love" (7A: 46). And Confucius also said one should "love all men comprehensively" (1: 6). But Confucius and Mencius believed that a person practicing Jen should start from one's parents and siblings and then extend to other people. This is called "*ai you cha deng*" or "love with gradations." In other words, although one should love both his father and a stranger, he should love his father first and more than the stranger. Confucius believed that "the greatest application of Jen is in being affectionate toward relatives,"[11] and "filial piety and brotherly respect are the root of Jen" (1: 2). A person of Jen must love first his father and elder brothers and then, by extension, other people. Mencius said, "Treat with respect the elders in my family, and then by extension, also the elders in other families. Treat with tenderness the young in my own family, and then by extension, also the young of other families" (1A: 7). He believed that a person

of Jen should be Jen to all people but attached affectionately only to his parents (7A: 45). This means that one's parents exert a greater pull on him or her. Thus, when both one's father and a stranger are in need, the doctrine of love with gradations justifies one's helping one's father before the stranger.

In this regard Confucius and Mo Tzu had different perspectives. Mo Tzu had a utilitarian approach. For him moral life is desirable because of the benefits it brings with it. He said, "What the man of humanity devotes himself to surely lies in the promotion of benefits for the world and the removal of harm from the world. This is what he devotes himself to."[12] Mo Tzu argued that only by universal love is it possible to generate the most desirable outcome of utilities. For Confucius, moral life is desirable for its own sake. Jen demands that one love one's parents first and other people second. This is the ideal moral life one should devote oneself to. If a man treats his father as he treats a stranger and vice versa, then he is neglecting the affectionate tie between him and his father and hence fails to be Jen.

In *Caring*, Noddings follows a similar line of thought. She believes that morality requires two sentiments. The first sentiment is that of natural caring. Caring starts with a person's natural impulse to care. We naturally care for our own family and relatives and people close to us. The second sentiment "arises from our evaluation of the caring relation as good, as better than, superior to, other forms of relatedness" (Noddings 1984, 83). This is the genuine moral sentiment. Because the most intimate situations of caring are natural, proximity is powerful in caring (Noddings 1984, 54). Noddings notes that "my caring is always characterized by a move away from self, . . . I care deeply for those in my inner circles and more lightly for those farther removed from my personal life. . . . The acts performed out of caring vary with both situational conditions and type of relationship" (1984, 16). In agreement with the Confucian, Noddings concludes, "I shall reject the notion of universal love, finding it unattainable in any but the most abstract sense and thus a source of distraction" (1984, 29).[13] For Noddings, this gradation of caring is justified by the fact that "my very individuality is defined in a set of relations" (1984, 51). This set of relations is my basic reality. What is right for me to do is defined in this reality. Thus, "an ethics of caring implies a limit on our obligation" (1984, 86). For people too far away, even if we would like to care, we simply cannot. While neither Confucius nor Mencius put a limit on the scope of one's practicing Jen, given their emphasis on one's filial duty and the extension to other family members and relatives, it is not possible for one to practice universal love directly to all the people in the world. If care as a natural sentiment arises from our daily life, it is only natural for us to start caring for people around us and then by extension for other people away from us; and if this kind of caring is the base for the highest moral ideal, then it is only reasonable to have gradations among those we care for.

In this regard philosophers of the care perspective such as Noddings and the Confucian again jointly stand in opposition to Kantian and utilitarian ethics. Kantians and utilitarians subscribe to the concept of impartiality. For them all moral patients exert an equal pull on all moral agents. However, for the Confucian and the one-caring, parents and others who are closely related certainly have a stronger pull. Accordingly, although we should care for everyone in the world if possible, we do need to start with those closest to us. This is not to say that we should care only for people close to us. It means that starting with those close to us is the only reasonable way to practice Jen and care. It would be perfect if a mother could care, in addition to her own baby and her neighbor's, for every little baby in the world who needs care. Unfortunately that is not possible. So she should be content with giving her care to her own baby and, perhaps, her neighbor's. This is as far as she normally can go, and this is our way of life as people of Jen and care. Giving priority to people near us is not merely justified by the fact that the closer the needy are to us geographically the more efficient our aid is. Even if it were equally efficient, we would still feel more obliged to help the nearby. This feeling can be justified by the notion of care with gradations.[14]

IV. Is Confucian Ethics a Care Ethics That Has Oppressed Women?

We have identified three major areas in which there are similarities between Confucianism and feminist care ethics. For a long period of time Confucianism has been notorious for its suppression of women. Feminism is primarily a fighter for women's liberation. Is it possible for them to share philosophically significant common ground? My answer is affirmative. I think the similarities between the two are not in the ways they treat women but in the way of their philosophical thinking, in the way they view the nature and foundation of morality, and the way they believe morality should be practiced. Based on these similarities, we can conclude that Confucian ethics is a care ethics.

If Confucian ethics is a care ethics, a question that naturally arises here is, How can it be possible for a care ethics to have been so uncaring for women and to have oppressed women? Apparently there is a discrepancy. To shed some light on the problem and to dissolve the apparent discrepancy, in this section I will first show, through a historical examination of the development of Confucianism, that to a large extent Confucius and Mencius, the founders of Confucianism, are not responsible for its history of oppression of women. Then I will show why it is not impossible, and hence not contradictory, for a philosophy that is essentially caring in characteristic to have oppressed women. If either of the two accounts succeeds, the discrepancy is dissolved.

As we know, Confucianism was founded by Confucius. The major doctrines of this philosophy are in his *Analects*. Mencius contributed a great deal to Confucianism by providing substantial arguments for ideas propounded by

Confucius. It is safe to say that by the time Mencius died, Confucianism was already well established. It is not strange that in China Confucianism is called the "Philosophy of Confucius-Mencius" ("*Kong-Meng zhi dao*"). Confucian scholars of later stages only developed or modified and hence more or less altered the philosophy. These versions usually have a specific name attached in addition to the generic term "Confucianism," e.g., "the Yin-Yang Confucianism" or "Neo-Confucianism." Since Confucianism was established by Confucius and Mencius, Confucianism without later modifications certainly well deserves the name of Confucianism.

It is a fact that under the name of Confucianism there has been oppression of women. But since when has it been so? If it can be shown that Confucianism became oppressive to women only at a later stage, since Confucianism had existed before it became so, one can say that oppressing women is not an essential characteristic of Confucianism, and hence Confucianism as propounded by Confucius and Mencius can be a care ethics.

The most notorious women-oppressive doctrine under the name of Confucianism is that the husband is the wife's bond. According to *Po Hu Tung*, the Encyclopedia of the Yin-Yang Confucianism, a bond ("*gang*") gives orderliness. It serves to order the relations between the superior and the inferior, and to arrange and adjust the way of humankind.[15] Then why should the husband be the wife's bond? Why is not the other way around? The principal justification of this is the yin-yang doctrine.

In Chinese philosophy, yin and yang are two mutually complementary principles or forces. The words originally referred to two natural physical phenomena, i.e., clouds shading the sun and the sun shining respectively. Later their meanings were expanded broadly to cover two general kinds of phenomena. Yang represents light, warmth, dryness, hardness, masculinity, activity, and so on, while yin represents darkness, cold, moisture, softness, passivity, and so on. Between yin and yang, yang is the superior and dominant principle, and yin is the inferior and subservient or subordinate principle. Accordingly, all phenomena in the world are results of the interplay of these two principles. Between male and female, male is the yang and female the yin. From this it follows that, prior to marriage, a woman must listen and yield to her father, after marriage, to her husband, and after her husband dies, to her son. In reality, domination has translated into oppression. Under this philosophy, the wife is judged almost entirely on the basis of her relationship to her husband. She must remain obedient to her husband. For her, "to die of starvation is a small matter, but to lose her chastity is a large matter." To serve and please her husband is her destined duty. When there is absolute power/domination there is abuse of the power/domination. Women's fate was thus doomed.[16]

But when was this yin-yang doctrine incorporated into Confucianism? Confucius himself did not talk about yin-yang. Like most of his contemporaries, Confucius believed in the Mandate of Heaven, but he never went so far

as to attempt to work out a mysterious cosmological system, let alone a systematic theoretical justification of the oppression of women. The Chinese word for person or people is gender-neutral ("*ren*"). To say specifically 'women' or 'men' one must use a gender indicator, for example, "female *ren*" or "male *ren*." The *Analects* only specifically mentions women a few times. It never suggests that men dominate or oppress women. In one place it is recorded that Confucius went to visit Nan Zi, the wife of the duke of Wei (6: 26). But there Confucius did not make a statement in regard to relationships between men and women. In another place, Confucius did make a statement about women. He said, "Young women and small men are hard to rear. If you become familiar with them you lose respect, and if you keep aloof you provoke resentment" (17: 25; my translation). Here Confucius offered an observation of young women rather than a theory about women in general. It probably reflects a social prejudice that already existed in his time. Given Confucius's later illustrious status in China, this short comment on (young) women may have considerably influenced people's view on women in general and probably reinforced people's prejudice against women. However, there is no reason for one to think that this view is an inherent or essential part of Confucius's thought or an inevitable consequence of his general philosophy.

Like Confucius, Mencius did not talk about yin-yang either. He, however, mentioned women in his book. For example, Mencius believed that, although men and women outside of marital relationships should avoid physical contact with each other, a man definitely should pull his sister-in-law out of a pond, by whatever means possible, including bear hands, if she were drowning. Although Mencius suggested that obedience was a virtue for women (for instance, 3B: 2), his general attitude toward women was not negative. This is so perhaps partly due to his relation with his mother, who brought him up single-handedly after his father died young. One can hardly imagine that a person from such a family would advocate a philosophy of the husband's being the wife's bond. According to Fung Yu-lan, a predominant historian of Chinese philosophy, probably the yin-yang school did not enter the Confucian school until after Mencius died, and it was during the Chi and Han dynasties that the yin-yang doctrine came to be almost completely amalgamated with Confucianism (Fung 1953, 2: 9).

The philosopher most responsible for blending the yin-yang doctrine into Confucianism is Tung Chung-shu (179-104 B.C.). Tung's high position in the state and his great scholarship in Confucianism and the classics facilitated his effort in combining Confucianism with the yin-yang doctrine. A substantial portion of his major philosophical work, *Ch'un Ch'iu Fan Lu* (*Luxuriant Gems of the Spring and Autumn Annals*), deals with yin-yang. Tung believed that yin and yang are two opposing forces that follow the constant course of Heaven. There is an intimate relationship between Heaven and humans. Tung said, "The relationships between ruler and subject, father and son, husband and

wife, are all derived from the principles of the yin and yang. The ruler is yang, the subject yin; the father is yang, the son yin; the husband is yang, the wife yin. . . . The yang acts as the husband, who procreates (the son). The yin acts as the wife, who gives assistance (to the husband). The 'three bonds,' comprising the Way of the King (*wang tao*), may be sought for in Heaven."[17] Thus among the human relationships discussed by Confucius, Tung singled out three. He believed that in the human world, the relationships between the ruler and the subject, the father and the son, and the husband and the wife, are the same as that between Heaven and Earth. Corresponding to the yang, the ruler, the father, and the husband dominate over the subject, the son, and the wife respectively, who correspond to the yin, in the same way as Heaven dominates over Earth.

Now, we can determine who is responsible for the women-oppressiveness of Confucianism. There is no evidence in works by Confucius or Mencius explicitly indicating that they had a women-oppressive view. If it is true that neither Confucius nor Mencius specifically spoke highly of women, it was so probably because women's social status was low at their times. There is no essential connection between their doctrine of Jen on the one hand and their view on women on the other. It is Tung Chung-shu who was most responsible for incorprating the yin-yang doctrine into Confucianism, which resulted in a women-oppressive version. So, one way for the feminist to deal with Confucianism might be found in the slogan "Back to Confucius-Mencius!" By returning to Confucius and Mencius we can purify Confucianism of Tung's yin-yang doctrine of the oppression of women.

In the following I will answer the question how it is possible for a care ethics to have taken part in the oppression of women. My point is that people may hold the same principle while they disagree on the application of it. Later Confucians may have excluded women from the domain of the practice of Jen because they did not believe that women are as fully persons as men are. The apparent discrepancy between the oppressive view toward women and the concept of Jen may be explained away by the account that many Confucians had a limited application domain of the concept of Jen.

In history, it is not rare for people to hold a certain principle while practicing something that would appear contrary to that very principle. The ancient Athenians believed in democracy. Yet their democracy was limited to "citizens." Slaves were excluded from participation in democracy because they were not citizens. Imagine that a political change took place in the city-state and consequently all slaves were allowed to participate in democracy along with the citizens. Now, should we say that the Athenians have changed their principle of democracy or that they continue to hold the same principle but expanded the domain of its participants? I think the latter is the appropriate answer. A Christian may have held a strong belief in the brotherhood/sisterhood among her fellows, and yet at the same time may have taken a black

slave. For her there was no contradiction simply because she sincerely believed that blacks were not among her fellow people to whom brotherhood/sisterhood would apply. Suppose later this person changed her view on blacks and realized that, after all, blacks were also her fellow people. Would one say that this person changed her principle of brotherhood/sisterhood or that she changed the application domain of the principle? I think the right answer is the latter.

The same logic holds true for our case on Confucianism. Assuming that Confucius and Mencius held restrictive views of women, it would not cause any contradiction for them to hold a care ethics. A care ethics may extend or reduce its application domain. For Confucius and Mencius, Jen is a human relation. It does not apply to animals.[18] Today a Confucian who is firmly convinced by Peter Singer's (1979) argument for animal equality may hold that Jen should be practiced on animals too. In the same way, if a Confucian was convinced that women were not fully persons, he might well have thought that Jen did not fully apply to women. If it is the case, changing the view to include women into the domain of the application of Jen will only alter the application domain of the concept, not the concept itself.

So, is Confucianism a care ethics that has oppressed women? If by Confucianism is meant Confucianism after Tung Chung-shu's yin-yang philosophy, the answer to this question is definitely affirmative. If one wants to say that the genuine Confucianism is the one before Tung, then there is no evidence that the Confucianism by Confucius and Mencius themselves was really oppressive to women. I have also shown that it is possible for a person to hold a philosophy which is caring in nature and at the same time excludes women from its application. If this possibility is real, then it is possible for Confucianism as a care ethics to have oppressed women. And furthermore, if this in turn is accurate, then it is possible for us to fully restore the concept of care of Confucianism by eliminating the women-oppressive doctrine from it.

V. Observations and Discussions

Now we can make three interrelated observations. First, our investigation supports the claim that care orientation is not a characteristic peculiar to one sex. Care is usually regarded as a feminine characteristic in Western Culture, and care ethics is a "feminine" ethics. Confucian ethics has been one of a male-dominated society. For many, Jen is primarily a male or manly characteristic. If by "male" we mean the patriarchal characteristic, Confucianism has surely been a male ethics. Yet the ethics is a care-perspective ethics, not a rights-perspective ethics. Whereas for feminist ethics men in the Western culture are generally not so ready to think along the line of the care perspective, for many Confucians, women probably have to overcome more difficulties before they can be Jen. If my "feministic" interpretation of the Confucian Jen is correct, it will confirm a view shared by many that different perspectives in

ethics are results of cultural nurturing rather than a natural difference based on sex.

Second and more important, my study shows that care-orientation is not a characteristic peculiar to a particular social group or culture either. Some feminists believe that the care-orientation in morality is somehow related to social subordination. This belief is unwarranted. For example, by focusing on the similarities between feminist moralities and African moralities, Sandra Harding suggests that this kind of morality is a result of social subjugation. She writes, "We are different, not primarily by nature's design, but as a result of the social subjugations we have lived through and continue to experience" (1987, 311-312). Accordingly, we should expect similar cognitive styles and world views from peoples engaged in similar kinds of social activities. She seems to suggest that, just as the female moralities have a lot to do with male dominance, the African moralities have a lot to do with Western imperialist dominance. But given the results of our investigation of Confucian ethics, even Harding's explanation is too narrow. Confucianism took its form more than two thousand years before China became dominated by Western imperialism, and has continued to maintain its influence over the Chinese people, with the exception of a few periods. Thus it would seem as incorrect to say that the care perspective is essentially a morality of the dominated as it would be incorrect to say that it is essentially one of the female sex.

Third, as feminism vigorously spreads, it will eventually confront Confucianism. When the two meet, what is likely to happen? One may think that feminism will conquer and thereby replace Confucianism, or one may think that thousands-year-old Confucianism in its homeland will defeat feminism, as it has conquered so many other Western philosophies. It seems to me neither is likely to happen. Since Confucianism is so deeply rooted in China and some of its neighboring countries that it has become an essential way of life, it is unlikely to be replaced by a new Western philosophy. But Confucianism will not defeat feminism either. As a philosophy, feminism represents a world trend of women's liberation. This trend is not likely to be defeated. Thus, given that Confucianism and feminism are not essentially opposed, we have reason to think that feminism may encounter no more, or perhaps even less, resistance in the Confucian world than in the West. In the areas of the world where Confucianism has been a dominant force, however, feminism may not be able to prevail as an independent force side by side with Confucianism. Since, as we have shown, Confucianism and feminism share important common grounds, it is possible to reconstruct Confucianism to be feminist. If this is the case, then it seems more likely for feminism to prevail in a form of new Confucianism. Thus, in these areas of the world, the eventual prevalence of feminism and the Confucianism's survival of the feminist challenge may turn out to be one thing—a new form of Confucianism.

NOTES

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1. By "care ethics" I mean the feminist ethics with an emphasis on care instead of rights or justice, represented by feminist philosophers such as Nel Noddings and Carol Gilligan. I do not regard care ethics as the only feminist ethics. Just like feminism itself, feminist care ethics is not a uniform theory. The views of feminist care ethics used in this paper are held by some influential feminist philosophers although other feminist philosophers do not consider them to be authoritative. Confucianism as a philosophy centers on morality and hence is essentially ethic in characteristic. In the paper I refer to Confucianism both as an ethics and a philosophy.

2. Some feminist philosophers, however, have criticized this mother-child model of human relationship. See Hoagland (1991).

3. In this paper translations of Confucius and Mencius are, unless otherwise indicated, from Arthur Waley (1989), and D. C. Lau (1970) respectively, occasionally with my own slight revisions where it is appropriate. Following conventional practice, the source is indicated, for Confucius, for example, as "12: 22," which stands for Confucius's *Analects*, chapter 12, section 22, and for Mencius, as "2A: 6," which stands for *Mencius*, chapter 2A, section 6.

4. Confucius, *the Doctrine of the Mean*, chap. 20.

5. "To conquer oneself and return to propriety" is Tu's translation (1968).

6. Some feminists such as Virginia Held have been critical of Noddings in this regard. See Held (1987b).

7. "Right" here is a translation/interpretation of "*yi*," which can also be understood as "appropriate." In *the Doctrine of the Mean*, chapter 20 states, "*yi* means setting things right and proper."

8. For a discussion of care- and principle-orientation, see Blum (1988).

9. For a discussion of the difference between Jen and sage, see Chang (1989, chap. 11). Later Confucians, such as Ch'eng Hao ("a person of Jen forms one body with all things without any differentiation") and Han Yu ("universal love is called Jen"), elevated Jen to the level of sagehood, which is evidently not Confucius's belief.

10. *Mo Tzu*, chap.15, in Chan (1963, 214).

11. Confucius, *the Doctrine of the Mean*, chap. 20, in Chan (1963, 104).

12. *Mo Tzu*, chap. 15. See Chan (1963, 213).

13. For a different view see Benhabib (1987).

14. Many feminists, like many later Confucianists, believe in universal love without gradations. This is not the place, nor is it the author's intention to develop a full-fledged defense of graded love. If the argument for graded love presented here seems inadequate or unconvincing, I am content that I have shown that some feminists share the view with Confucians in this regard. For a recent defense of the Confucian graded love, see Lai (1991).

15. *Po Hu Tung*, chap. 29. See Fung (1953, 2: 44).

16. But according to Chang (1989, chap. 8), it was not developed to such an extreme until Southern Sung Dynasty (1127-1279).

17. Tung Chung-shu, *Luxuriant Gems of the Spring and Autumn Annals*, chap. 53, quoted in Fung (1953, 2: 42-43).

18. In the *Analects*, we are told a story that Confucius's stable was burned down when he was out. Upon his return Confucius asked, "Have any people been hurt?" He did not ask about the horse (10: 12).

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